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AUTHOR Schuman, David
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ABSTRACT

Too frequently college education takes place in an environment that isolates and fragments the individual rather than in one that not only allows but demands moral, ethical, and emotional growth. Deep Springs College, which was founded in 1917 with the goal of developing responsible, altruistic, and idealistic citizens, seeks to provide its students with the opportunity to find out what it means to make decisions and to live with the consequences. The college is located in a 50-square-mile desert valley and is socially self-contained. Its approximately 25 students work 20 hours a week on the college's cattle ranch as an integral part of their education. There is no core curriculum and no degrees are awarded, but courses are rigorously academic in form and content, and most students transfer to conventional colleges as juniors after 2 or 3 years. The power structure of the college is relatively diffuse with the student body having responsibility for the conduct of its own members, a director whose powers are not spelled out, and a board of trustees which does not involve itself with the college's day-to-day operation. The college's isolation, the distribution of powers and the integrated programs of study, labor, and self-government provide the context for developing individuals who are schooled not just in the academic sense but also as responsible and compassionate human beings. (HB)

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EDUCATION AND SOLIPSISM

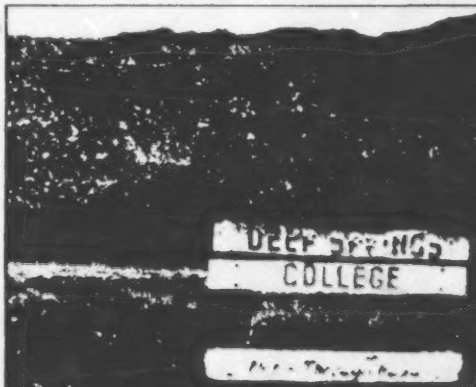
sol-ip-sism (sŏl'əp-siz'əm, sō'ləp-) *n.* The theory that the self is the only reality. [L. *sōlus*, alone + *ipse*, self + -ISM.] —**sol'ip-sist** *n.* —**sol'ip-sis'tic** *adj.* —*American Heritage Dictionary*

by David Schuman

I RECENTLY HAD CAUSE to look through the catalog of a fully-accredited institution of higher learning called John F. Kennedy University of Orinda, California. The courses there fell into two categories: on the one hand, there was a graduate program in parapsychology, English offerings in "Literature of the Mystic Quest" and "The Energy of Communication," a two-year sequence called "The Tapestry of Knowledge," something on "Varieties of Mind-Body Therapies" – in other words, the sort of psycho-junk you expect to see advertised on the bulletin board at your local frozen yogurt parlor. On the other hand were courses of straight no-nonsense training in Police Science, Personnel Management, Business Administration, and Accounting. I couldn't help wondering how the Primal Scream majors got along with the pre-cops when they happened to meet up in the cafeteria.

I was about to dismiss the school as just so much institutionalized Bay Area weirdness when it occurred to me that John F. Kennedy University was on to something. Not only were the touchy-feely courses and the career training united by the dynamic of egoism and narcissism masquerading as "potential"; too, the university was responding in predictable and understandable fashion to real shortcomings in our conventional colleges. All over the nation, people are beginning to see that the increase in college enrollments has not led to a decrease in misery, small-mindedness, or social pathology; people are beginning to call for education that is integrative, value-oriented, and humane – at the same time that they demand practicality and cost-effectiveness. Universities respond to this conflicting message with such token reforms as refurbished core curricula and affinity-group housing, all the while coming more and more into

Deep Springs Campus →



The largest campus – an entire 50-square-mile high desert valley to itself – the smallest student body – 23 young men – and a 64 year achievement of serious education, Deep Springs College has a better, older way. If you want something to last, a car, a shoe, a college, drop it in the desert. (Address: Deep Springs, California, via Dyer, Nevada 89010.) –SB

Why can't college education take place in an environment that not only allows, but demands moral, ethical, and emotional growth?

the power of the marketing specialists, the Management By Objective seminarians, and the bottom-line boys. John F. Kennedy University is unique only in that it takes both routes at the same time.

There are better responses, and I will describe one in some detail. But first, it is necessary to recognize that in crucial ways our colleges are structured to produce not citizens and compassionate people, but self-serving egomaniacs.

The normal college performs several functions quite well: students with discipline and curiosity can emerge with impressive verbal and quantitative skills, a sufficient familiarity with the Western tradition of thought, and thorough knowledge of an academic field. In four years of more or less independent living they can establish goals and identities outside the influence of the home. I do not mean to belittle these accomplishments.

Yet it seems to me that all too frequently they take place in an environment that isolates and fragments the individual. During his first week in a normal college the student, no matter what courses he chooses, learns that the next few years consist of a series of obstacles – classes, distribution requirements, exams, theses – leading finally to graduation. The defining characteristic of these tasks, and what makes them almost unique in human endeavor, is that they are faced by the individual alone, and that success or failure in them has consequences to the individual alone. As a result, one of the undeniable and pervasive fictions colleges teach every day is that life's problems present themselves to individuals, are solved or not solved by individuals, with repercussions that do not extend beyond individuals. Thus, when we see people in later life deserting their families, exploiting their employees, cheating their bosses, befouling their environment, and otherwise indulging themselves, all the while blithely assuring everybody that while they might not be acting well, it's OK because they are "taking responsibility for their actions," these people are repeating the lesson they learned, among other places, in college, where they could flunk a test, cut a class, or skip an assignment without visibly affecting anybody but themselves. College is where we are confirmed in our delusion that the source and outer frontier of all significant action is the self.

And if this weren't bad enough, the concept of "self" that conventional colleges promote is preposterously distorted. I am not the first to point out that in spite of all the rhetoric to the contrary, our system of higher education produces cerebrating machines by intention, and emotional, ethical, and physical people only as an afterthought. At most universities, certain elements of the human character are identified over and over, in the classroom, as crucial to the survival of the race: sympathy and compassion, the ability to make responsible judgments, the ability to live together in harmony. Yet the situation in which these abilities are lauded is one where competition and caginess determine success, and important decisions are the exclusive reserve of the teacher. When it comes to actually cultivating the desirable human traits, or even to providing a milieu in which they might be nurtured, the academy either begs off entirely or else establishes an ill-financed and ineptly-staffed Office of Student Services – whose principal duties are likely to consist of cafeteria policy and Greek residence coordination.

Why can't college education – or at least part of it – take place in an environment that not only

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Morning at Deep Springs: class

allows, but that demands moral, ethical, and emotional growth? An environment where values must be discovered and tested as part of everyday life? An environment that combines freedom with serious obligation, exposing thoughtlessness and self-indulgence, providing students the rare and difficult opportunity to find out what it means to make decisions and to live with their consequences – in other words, what it means to try to live virtuously?

Nothing in my first fifteen years as a student and teacher in some of the finest universities in the country led me to believe that such an environment was even contemplated, much less accomplished. Then I discovered a little-known institution called Deep Springs College, and although I now work there, I think I am objective when I say that it proves higher education need not be solipsistic.

Deep Springs looks like one of those settlements in the high desert of Nevada that sits there a mile or so off a minor highway, nothing more than a few weathered ranch buildings, a scattered collection of semi-defunct rusted-out vehicles with their hoods perpetually raised, some cows, and a stand of cottonwoods. It appears to be just another of the small-scale beef-and-alfalfa operations scattered throughout the lunar expanse of sand, sagebrush, and abrupt rocky hills of the Great Basin, where the principal industry is nuclear waste disposal. No food, no gas, no lodging. Next service, eighty-five miles. In fact, Deep Springs is one of the nation's most unusual colleges, and has been since it was founded in 1917.

Radical even by modern standards, it must have seemed truly bizarre then. In deeding the land to the college, the founder, an industrialist named L.L. Nunn, specified that the enrollment should be held below twenty-six students, all of whom, in addition to their studies, would participate in a program of self-government, and work at least half time on the cattle ranch that is the college campus. The students were designated as the beneficial owners of the property, legally held by a board of trustees mandated to "ascertain, consider and comply with, the desires of" the student body. One of these trustees, according to the deed, was always to be an elected student. No fees whatsoever were to be charged.

None of this has changed since the founding. The student body is still responsible for the conduct of its own members. All students work twenty hours per week – not in payment for their education,, but as an integral part of it. There is no core curriculum and no degrees are awarded. After two or three years at Deep Springs, students transfer to conventional colleges as juniors.

These innovative features are bound together by a strong thread of traditionalism – some would say conservatism. At present, because of a clause in the original deed of trust, Deep Springs still has an all-male student body. The admissions policy is extremely selective: SAT scores average around 700 verbal and 700 math, and qualities of character and motivation are equally high. Although the classes are small (averaging three or four students) and often student-initiated, they are, by common consent, rigorously academic in their form and content, with reading assignments, papers, exams, and grades. The teachers are almost all Ph.D.s from places like Harvard, the University of Chicago, Yale, Cornell, Berkeley, and MIT – the same colleges to which many of the students transfer. Students affirm and maintain two "ground rules": nobody may use non-medicinal drugs, and nobody may leave the fifty square mile valley in which the college is located. Over the years, the alumni have tended toward the professions, academia, and government. There are a few novelists, composers, and painters. One or two are journalists. There are two university presidents, a federal judge, an ambassador. There is also a blacksmith, a riverboat

Afternoon: ranch work (branding in this case).

pilot, and a member of the Weather Underground. There have been, since 1917, only about 450 alumni, and on the whole they have fulfilled the founder's hopes that they would become responsible, altruistic, and idealistic citizens – not the "hirelings of the avaricious" that "our educational institutions too often prepare." Almost to a man, they live modestly, serve prodigiously, and look back on Deep Springs as the pivotal experience of their lives.

That experience, in fact as well as theory, little resembles what we usually think of as college life. Most of the students are up well before dawn, putting on overalls and boots to trudge through the dark to the chores. Some go off to milk the cows, some to feed the stock, some to set the tables for breakfast. At 7:30, when the old railroad bell rings to announce the meal, faculty, staff, families, and students drift to the boarding house from their nearby dorms and homes. Breakfast consists of milk less than two hours old, served from steel pitchers; home-churned butter; eggs from the hen house; and perhaps sausage from a pig that was raised and slaughtered by the students.

The morning is taken up with classes – normal undergraduate courses like Freshman English, French 2, Calculus, Introduction to Philosophy, and Shakespeare. The pace is rapid, and the discussions are animated. Frequently, when class is over, the discussion will spill out onto the lawn or into the boarding house, where it may continue for hours.

Classes end at lunchtime. The afternoon is devoted to ranch work. Students raise hay and cattle for sale, and have a dairy herd, bees, pigs, and a garden for domestic use. They also work in the office, library, bookstore, and dining hall. In essence, they staff the entire operation, with limited professional help. Faculty spend the afternoons preparing classes. On the rare occasions when they have a spare hour or two they are free to join in the labor. The work ends with dinner, and once again the whole community gathers to eat. During the meal someone taps a pitcher and begins the announcements: the student admissions committee will meet at eight to continue its review of applicants for next year's class; madrigal group at seven-thirty; volleyball between dinner and meetings; volunteers are needed to clean the chicken coop.

These activities wind down by nine or nine-thirty, and serious study begins (it is also carried on during the morning between classes, and at all odd hours). For a break, a student might wander to the boarding house, where the coffee urn is always on, there to find other students, perhaps a teacher or two, and endless talk. Lights burn late. The library never closes. As the last student is going to bed, perhaps having put the finishing touches on a term paper, the first is getting up for morning milking.

How does a life like this – anachronistic and contrived as it is – provide an education for the real world? If one starts from the premise that the world needs people who are not only schooled in the usual academic sense but also responsible and compassionate, then three features of the Deep Springs program emerge as essential – features that could easily be reproduced elsewhere: the intensity that derives from smallness and isolation; the distribution of powers; and the integrated programs of study, labor, and self-government.

The conventional college is structured around the motif of escape. Students escape the "real world" of work and accountability on campus. They escape the campus by going into town for entertainment. Socially, jocks escape nerds, fraternity men escape intellectuals, blacks escape whites, Young Americans for Freedom escape Students for a Democratic Society, faculty escape students. Everybody escapes thinking about curricular

French class, main building

matters through chemical stupefaction and through the greatest escape of all: sleep. I think it is significant that the drugs of choice on college campuses have always been soporific (alcohol) or isolationist (marijuana), and the activity of choice has always been some form of escapism, frequently epitomized either by leaving or passing out.

With its population of about forty-five, Deep Springs is the only settlement in its valley. The nearest town is an hour away, on the other side of a magnificent but torturous 7000 foot mountain pass. As a result, the community is socially self-contained. While mail comes in daily and five or six times a semester there are visitors (family, guest speakers, applicants), the system remains emotionally sealed.

From this simple fact flow enormous consequences. People, who on the normal campus would dismiss each other immediately, often become as close as brothers at Deep Springs. They eat, study, work, and govern together. Late at night, any two of them are likely to find themselves the only people within a twenty-five mile radius who are awake. They will decide to have some coffee together and might end up sitting in the deserted boarding house until dawn. When this happens, and it happens frequently, superficial qualities retreat into insignificance, and human ones emerge. While real difficulties between people may remain, the judgments that are formed tend to be generous. Disliking someone at Deep Springs comes to be seen as a luxury and, like most luxuries, a waste.

Thus, easy judgments are discouraged. So too is that easiest of all judgments: the refusal to judge. Every year, two or three students arrive professing that whatever an individual does is his business, so long as nobody else is harmed, and that to judge him is a mistake if not a downright sin. I sometimes think that one of the only lessons high schools teach is that a "value judgment" is a morally reprehensible act tantamount to child molestation. In any case, in small communities, two facts quickly become evident: one is that those actions which are "harmless to others" are rare indeed. If a student sleeps through morning dairy, and the cows don't get milked, they get mastitis and when that happens nobody has milk. When there are only three students in a class and one of them is unprepared, the discussion suffers in ways that are immediately obvious. In a place like Deep Springs the consequences of all actions are conspicuous. A second lesson is that judgments get made, one way or another. A sick cow, an empty milk pitcher, a turgid class, are objectively and unambiguously bad. In such cases, committing a value judgment is a creative and constructive act. It places blame where it belongs, thus liberating the innocent, and it helps prevent future errors, thus aiding in the education of the guilty. It sets boundaries on the retribution, and it affirms that the community has identifiable values. If the judgment is executed in the spirit of generosity – and it usually is, not only because its maker and its receiver will probably have to face each other over breakfast the next morning, but also, given the circumstances, because the roles may soon be reversed – then the most valuable lesson of all occurs: the student finds that failure is not fatal, but human. Only at that point can he profit from it

And who, exactly, does the final judging? To whom are students, teachers, and staff finally accountable? In other words, where does the real power lie?

Many colleges deal with this question in ways that no political theorist has seriously entertained since Aristotle distinguished the household from the state in Book I of the Politics. In the last couple of decades the concept of *in loco parentis* has disappeared only in the sense that it was synonymous with paternalism. The university still

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College student

operates like a family. Now, it is merely a "progressive" family instead of a despotic one. It is no longer accurate to say that all of the power is concentrated in a few fatherly administrators. But it remains a fact that when a question of rights, privileges, or jurisdiction arises, the contending factions square off like a couple of twelve-year-olds at recess. The atmosphere is permissive, but it is important to remember that "permissive" is a term from the lexicon of child psychology, not education or politics.

When colleges are overtly political, and use political terms, it is a politics of conflicting interest groups and of inherent inequality that is invoked. Nowhere do members of what we cynically call the university community talk or act as though there were, in fact, a community in the university. The ideas of mutual restraint, obligation, participation, agreement on major goals and basic philosophy that mark the discourse of true communities appear, at the conventional college, only in the textbooks of political theory classes. It is no coincidence, of course, that these classes themselves are more and more forced into extinction, to be replaced by ones that use the "clean" and "value free" terminology of social science, survey research, and bureaucracy: the language that is itself appropriate to the political structure of the liberal multiversity. That this is the structure of the political world, writ small, does not justify the situation. If colleges are the DNA of society, then we don't have far to look to discover how we might restore to the world that sense of community it needs.

One way might be to introduce young people to authority structures which are neither authoritarian nor flaccid, but political – in the Greek sense, where politics meant constant public participation in the ongoing effort to arrive at a good and just civic life. Smallness is a necessary quality for such a structure (Aristotle limited the size of the polis to those who could gather within hearing of a single orator), but it is not sufficient. A reasonably egalitarian and flexible distribution of power is also necessary.

For example, at Deep Springs, the board of trustees has *de jure* authority to act for the college. The chairman's signature appears on contracts and I.R.S. forms. But the board is obligated by the founding document, the deed of trust, to respect and comply with student sentiment and to that end a student is a full voting member. Also, the adult trustees live far from the college and convene there only twice a year, and thus could not interfere in the day-to-day operations if they wanted to – which they don't. In their absence, the chief administrator is the Director, but his powers are nowhere spelled out. The deed of trust specifically gives the student body responsibility for "the conduct of its own members," but what does that mean? Academic evaluation, power to sell the cattle, admissions and expulsions? Or quiet hours, dress codes, and films committee? Lurking in the background to confuse the issue even further is the alumni association, a powerful force in matters of institutional policy, and the faculty, traditionally pre-eminent in curriculum and academic affairs.

As a result of this nebulous power structure, nobody can arbitrarily pronounce on a public matter, and then justify himself by invoking some etched-in-marble constitution. This fact affects both the content of the decisions made, and the method of reaching them. Suddenly, considerations like mutual benefit, fairness, ethical content, even tradition, enter the picture where formerly chapter and verse would have sufficed. When the students vote to exercise their rights by adopting a stray dog, and then that dog bites a faculty member's infant daughter, they have learned an important distinction between power and justice. A

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College student

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teacher who offers a class that nobody is interested in, merely because teachers have that right, and then finds himself with an empty classroom, has learned the same distinction. Very quickly, everybody learns that the only effective way to act is after exhaustive public debate, with all parties having the opportunity to formulate and present their point of view.

I do not mean either to describe or advocate a system where nobody is in charge. In fact, real authority exists, but not merely by virtue of status or prerogative; it stems from reason, and devolves on an individual or group that (to paraphrase Hannah Arendt) can show itself to be right, or that has been right so often in the past that its advice cannot be safely ignored.

This notion frequently turns up in an interdisciplinary seminar called "Problems in Community and Authority." The course demonstrates the most unusual and valuable of Deep Springs' features: the interdependence of the academics, the labor, and the self-government. Being bright and thoughtful young people, the students come into the seminar (usually offered as part of the orientation semester) with some well-entrenched theories. There are for example the high school Emersonians, repulsed by years of petty regulations, uninspiring teachers and lowest-common-denominator curriculum. They come to college hoping to find Transcendental Heaven, where the individuals' unfettered expressions of freedom magically coalesce into utopia. They enter the seminar believing that the government which governs least is best; that the ideal human condition is absolute liberty.

Then there are the high school Nietzscheans. Unchallenged, frustrated by a system that has failed to provide them structures for the development of their potential, disgusted with current trends of permissiveness and lack of standards, resentful of their high school's leveling tendency, they come to college hoping to find an environment that will provide them with discipline, channel their energy, and surround them with equals. They enter the seminar thinking that human progress will occur only in a context of control and dedication.

As the course moves from Plato and Aristotle through Thoreau and Mill, picking up Marx, Locke, Shakespeare, Orwell, Tocqueville, Melville, and others along the way, the students are alternately challenged and reinforced in their beliefs. Meanwhile, the Emersonian will notice that his liberty to drink fresh milk depends on his roommate's lack of liberty to sleep past 4:30; a Nietzschean may be elected to the position of labor commissioner, and discover that order and discipline involve telling a friend he has to spend all day Sunday castrating calves; in fact order and discipline may involve spending Sunday that way himself. In any case, he frequently finds himself being arbitrary and insensitive.

By the end of the course, everybody's ideas about liberty and society are sophisticated indeed; the students still have theories, no doubt, but they are true to experience, as that experience has been sensitized and refined by the best that has been thought and written on the subject. Locke believes that one acquires a right to property by mixing one's labor with it. A student mixes his labor with the alfalfa field all afternoon – poisoning gophers. Does he therefore own it? Marx says that alienation in labor is the result of the workers' relationship to the means of production. A student gets up early in the morning to slaughter a steer. He uses his own knife, he is the beneficial owner of the animal, and it will end up on his plate with nobody deriving a profit from it along the way. Yet, when he slips the knife into the animal's throat and gropes for the jugular, does he feel at one with himself and his work? A student believes that the past is nothing but an encumbrance that each individual must cast off in order to create his own relevant world, unfettered by tradition and outmoded ideology. Fine. But when the toilet in the guest cottage springs a leak, he discovers that scrapping the old system to put in a new one is simply not possible, because the plumbing is an extensive and delicate network; it's tied into the boiler, which has an electric thermostat run by the generator, and if the generator fails the irrigation lines stop sprinkling, and the alfalfa dies. and . . . So he learns to work within the context of what he has inherited. He discovers that many of the modern parts he can use are shabby when

Setting the irrigation wheel line

compared to the old ones he is replacing. And he learns that the generations of student maintenance men who over the decades have compiled a plumbing system manual – by now grease-stained and dog-eared – these dead hands of the past are not his stale oppressors, but the very agents of his liberation. A student condemns Goneril and Regan when they mistreat old Lear. Age has its prerogatives; "reason not the need." But where is this magnanimity when the cooks, a retired couple from Nevada, insist that the students wear shirts and shoes in the boarding house? Over and over, daily, the Deep Springs student must test his theory against the world that he inhabits and that his theories help to shape. He soon discovers that while any fool can have an ideal, it takes character to live up to one. He learns that to be of value, an ideal must bear some relation to behavior, without losing its defining essence of impossibility.

In the normal college, idealism too often serves as the handmaiden of despair. Lofty goals like the cure for cancer, the end of racism and poverty, the Great American Novel, all prove not only elusive, but totally out of range. All too frequently, the next step is a retreat into cynicism, hedonism, careerism, or narcissism. In a community where the student confronts as part of his daily life imperatives that cannot be abandoned, such a retreat is impossible. The leaking toilet must be fixed, the hay must be put up before first snow, the composition must be written, even when these tasks are "impossible." The student who sits in philosophy class expounding the theory of the Übermensch, then spends two hours trying to overcome a mule's desire to remain unharnessed, has learned an undeniable lesson about aspiring toward the Godhead: he must do it, of course, but he must bring to the task some qualities of humility, commitment, dedication, and resilience.

I do not mean to propose Deep Springs as a utopia, or as a solution to the problems of education and society. The college's refusal to admit women is a serious shortcoming. Given the world of the 1980s, an all-male college that claims to value ethical development and to produce leaders is not just an anachronism, but an affront. Too, the school pays its faculty and staff poorly, and its elitism offends our democratic impulses.

But these problems are peculiar to this one institution; they are not of its essence, and similar schools could be structured so as to avoid them. Other problems, however, are inherent in just those qualities that make the school successful, and anyone who contemplates such a venture should be willing to accept them. At a certain point, intensity becomes frustration, accountability and openness becomes exhibitionism, and community becomes a pain in the neck. The small and isolated setting soon begins to give events a bizarre warp. Tiny irritations assume huge proportions: everything is a crisis, from a broken ditto machine to a fallen cake. Petty personal disputes can escalate quickly into feuds. Xenophobia and philosophical inbreeding are constant dangers.

On a more profound level, failure can become tragic. The stakes are high. At a normal college, failure is defined as a late paper, a dull class, a slanderous editorial in the school paper. At Deep Springs, failure is cruelty, insensitivity, arrogance, or irresponsibility. It involves real pain and suffering. It is unusual to live in such a place for any length of time without coming to believe that life presents one trial after another.

Yet it is equally unusual to emerge without coming to the belief that with discipline, patience, and cooperation, humans are capable of prevailing, and that the struggle is itself an education. Two years in a small, intense, isolated, self-governing community – no matter how rigorous the academic offerings – is not enough education for anybody. But it is enough so that when the student moves on to the more conventional academy, he does so with a new vision of himself and the world. What he sees is not just self, status and salary, mortgages and Mercedes, but a set of living obligations and possibilities. ■

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